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ABSTRACT

Every writing program contains implicit information on the amount of writing that should be assigned, how the essays should be evaluated, the type of grammar--if any--students should study, and the type of composition instruction that will be most effective. Research has not identified an optimal level of writing frequency, and although frequent writing may increase fluency, it does not by itself improve writing quality. Combining formal essays with informal, ungraded writing can help students improve both the fluency and the quality of their writing without increasing teachers' paper load. Research also suggests that the tradition and time consuming "student writes, teacher corrects" method should be modified. Giving students evaluative comments while they are drafting their essays encourages them to revise their writing to incorporate suggested changes. Peer evaluation helps students revise and develop a stronger sense of audience. Although students seem unable to translate concepts from formal grammar to strategies which improve their writing, research does support other approaches to grammar instruction, such as one which combines concepts from both traditional and transformational grammar. Grammar study is most useful when teachers make it an integral part of the writing curriculum and help students apply their grammatical knowledge during the final stage of editing or proofreading essays. Research also supports the claim that students learn to write better when teachers focus on the process rather than the product of writing. (HOD)

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Making Research Work for the Composition Teacher

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Making Research Work for the Composition Teacher

> "Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that."
>
> Through the Looking Glass
> Lewis Carroll

Today, composition teachers, like the Red Queen's unfortunate subjects, often find themselves running as fast as they can just to keep in the same place. Faced with five, sometimes six classes and often teaching 150 or more students a day, English teachers understandably despair when told to teach more writing more effectively, especially when most feel they would somehow have to work twice as hard to do so.

Teaching more writing may not be the best strategy for improving our students' writing skills. "More" is a relative term, of course, and if, as one observer claimed several years ago, "time once devoted to writing instruction has more recently been devoted to visual studies and electives," (Mellon, 1976) then more writing instruction is needed. However, two recent surveys found writing instruction has increased for some students (Bamberg, forthcoming; Benham, 1978), and given the class loads in most secondary schools, English teachers may be assigning as much writing as can reasonably be expected (Applebee, 1978; Bamberg and McKenna, 1978).

On the other hand, surveys also indicate that many teachers are not using the most effective methods to teach composition. Applebee (in press), for example, studied writing instruction in secondary schools across the nation and found that a majority of the teachers devoted little time to

prewriting and revision. Responses from classes taught by English Journal readers led Hoetker and Brossell (1980) to conclude that no more than 25 per cent of the teachers used all methods of writing instruction validated by research.

Every writing program contains implicit answers to four basic instructional questions: How much writing should be assigned? How should essays be evaluated? What type of grammar, if any, should students study? What type of composition instruction will be most effective? Teachers can get better results without working harder if their response to each of these four questions is based on composition research.

How Often Should Students Write?

Few secondary teachers have class loads low enough for them to assign weekly themes - long considered the "optimum" frequency - to all their students. Must students write weekly to improve their writing skills?

Ample evidence indicates that increasing writing frequency alone does not improve writing. Three different studies compared the writing of students who wrote weekly themes with those who wrote monthly themes and found no differences between the two groups (Heys, 1962; McColly and Remstedt, 1963; Wolf, 1966). However, students in one study believed that writing weekly essays helped them to become more fluent writers, a skill not measured by the experiment (Wolf, 1966).

Research has not identified an optimal level of writing frequency. Although frequent writing may increase fluency, it

does not by itself improve writing quality. Given the complexity of the writing process and the many facets of writing quality, such a finding is hardly surprising. Frequent writing may develop greater fluency, but ungraded free writing and journal assignments may increase fluency as well as, if not better than, formal essays. Although students need regular writing practice, a formal weekly essay need not be considered the sine qua non of a composition program. Combining formal essays with informal, ungraded writing can help students improve both the fluency and the quality of their writing without increasing teachers' paper load.

How Should Compositions Be Evaluated?

Responding to and evaluating student writing is the most time-consuming task in teaching writing, and some believe the most important. Students need some kind of response or evaluation, but how much and what kind? Traditionally, many teachers have taught composition primarily through comments and corrections on completed essays (Squire and Applebee, 1964), and a recent survey found this method still widely used (Applebee, in press). Are teacher comments an effective method for improving writing skills?

Burton and Arnold (1963) found that intensive evaluation - marking all errors and writing detailed comments - was not more effective than moderate evaluation - marking only errors pertaining to the skills being studied and writing a brief comment. Recently, Richard Beach (1979) explored the effect of evaluating students' essays during the process of writing

rather than after essays were completed. He found that students who received between-draft teacher evaluation wrote better essays, especially in the areas of development and support, than students receiving no evaluation. Another recent study (Karegianes et. al. 1980) has confirmed the positive instructional value of peer evaluation, a technique recommended by Moffett (1973) and Macrorie (1968), among others. In this study students who used an editing/rating sheet to give and receive peer evaluation improved their writing skills more than students whose essays were evaluated by their teachers.

Research does not support a "mark-every-error" approach to evaluation. Moreover, it suggests that the traditional and time-consuming "student writes-teacher corrects" method should be modified. Giving students evaluative comments while they are drafting their essays encourages them to revise their writing to incorporate suggested changes. Peer evaluation can help students not only revise their drafts but also develop a stronger sense of audience.

Should Students Study Grammar and If So, What Kind?

No demand has been made more insistently in recent years than the one for increased grammar instruction. Will teaching students formal grammar be the panacea "back-to-the-basics" advocates assume?

Probably no issue in composition instruction has been more thoroughly researched (Braddock, et. al., 1963), and results have consistently shown that formal grammar study

does not improve writing. A recent study which compared the effect of studying traditional grammar, transformational grammar, or no grammar reconfirmed the negative results of many earlier studies. After three years, students who studied no grammar wrote as well as those who studied either traditional or transformational grammar (Elley et. al., 1976).

Although students seem unable to translate concepts from formal grammar to strategies which improve their writing, research does support other approaches to grammar instruction. For example, one study compared a formal traditional grammar program with a "direct" or applied method. Teachers using the direct method selected concepts for study based on errors in students' writing and taught correct forms through examples and illustrations, while teachers using the formal grammar approach emphasized terminology and sentence analysis. After two years, students taught by the direct method wrote essays with fewer errors and of higher quality than students who studied formal grammar (Braddock et. al., 1963). In addition, research has consistently shown that sentence combining - a form of applied transformational grammar that gives students practice in generating sentences and manipulating syntactic structures - increases students' syntactic fluency and improves the quality of their writing (O'Hare, 1973; Morenberg, Daiker, & Kerek, 1978).

Rather than continuing with or returning to formal grammar instruction, teachers should develop applied grammar pro-

grams which combine concepts from both traditional and transformational grammar. Instruction in traditional grammar can focus on eliminating common usage and sentence structure errors while sentence combining exercises can extend the students' range of syntactic options. Grammar study is most useful when teachers make it an integral part of the writing curriculum and help students apply their grammatical knowledge during the final stage of editing or proofreading essays.

What Type of Composition Instruction Is Most Effective?

During the past 10-15 years, the dominant paradigm in writing instruction has shifted from writing-as-product to writing-as-process. New methods developed to implement the process-centered approach include brainstorming, free writing, prewriting heuristics, and peer group response to drafts during the composing process. Is a process-centered approach more effective than a traditional product-centered approach?

A recent study (Clifford, 1981) compared "collaborative composing" (a method which used free writing, brainstorming, small group and teacher response to free writing and initial drafts) to a traditional method which relied on discussion/analysis of professional and student essays and provided no assistance in prewriting or revision. After a semester of instruction he found that students who composed collaboratively wrote significantly better essays than those taught by the traditional method.

Implementing a process-centered approach improves stu-

dents' writing by developing their ability to "invent" or find ideas, increasing their sense of audience, and guiding their revisions. Even though the effectiveness of any writing instruction will ultimately be judged by the quality of essays our students write, research supports the claim that students learn to write better when teachers focus on the process rather than the product of writing. Despite its greater effectiveness, the process approach is not widely used by secondary teachers (Applebee, in press; Hoetker and Brossel, 1980). The constraints of the secondary classroom - large classes, inadequate space and furniture, immature students - undeniably create barriers to implementing a process approach. And even when these physical constraints are removed or reduced, psychic constraints - the reluctance to give up comfortable, familiar methods, and the fear of change - remain. However, teachers who successfully overcome these constraints and adopt a process-centered approach will find they have become more effective writing teachers.

Teaching composition will always be time consuming and difficult, but teachers can use research to make the task more manageable by following these guidelines: (1) balance free writing and formal essay assignments; (2) develop applied grammar programs that incorporate grammar study into writing instruction; (3) try new approaches to evaluation - brief, informal responses to student drafts or some type of peer evaluation; and (4) emphasize the writing process, not the written product. By putting research to work in these ways, composition teachers will find they can do a better job

of teaching writing - without working harder.

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